

Radio Iowa

Iowa Democrats, Republicans differ on impact of Obama's speech

By O. Kay Henderson

The three Iowa Democrats serving in the U.S. congress argue President Obama's speech on health care reform refocused and move the debate forward, while Republicans in the state's congressional delegation continue to express doubts. Congressman Bruce Braley, a Democrat from Waterloo, says Obama helped set the tone for the work that lies ahead.

"I think we're turning the page from some of the rhetoric and misinformation of August to a focus on facts, a focus on the enormous challenge we face in providing access to affordable, quality health care to all Americans and the common goals that we share about how we're going to go about doing that," Braley says.

Braley is a member of a House committee that passed a health care reform plan earlier this summer and Braley says Obama's speech helped set the agenda for the next stage of the debate.

"The most important thing he did was get us to focus on our common objectives and I think he captured that when he said that most of us agree on about 80 percent of what needs to be in meaningful health care reform. The difficult challenge is bridging that other 20 percent and getting the votes we need to get this bill on his desk," Braley says. "I think that the tone he set is going to be helpful to all of us who continue to work on this important challenge."

Congressman Tom Latham, a Republican from Ames, says the president gave a good speech, but didn't break any new ground.

"If we actually could work on a bipartisan basis, if we'd step back and focus on things that we could agree on that could be done and I think done every quickly," Latham says. "...Everyone today is concerned about their health care, but I didn't hear much that really changed anything."

Congressman Steve King, a Republican from Kiron, says the president's speech was "well-delivered," but King argues Obama's address raised false hopes.

"I think that there will be Americans who were given hope that the president is reasonable and bipartisan in his approach and yet I didn't hear really anything that gets Republican votes for the president's proposal," King says. "(Obama) is still for the public option, the government-run plan, and he is also challenging people who have taken very sound, factual positions and he has challenged their veracity."

King, an outspoken opponent of illegal immigration, was not the congressman who yelled at Obama after the president suggested it's wrong to say the health care reform plans under consideration in congress would provide health care to illegal immigrants, but King sympathizes with the congressman who yelled that Obama was lying.

"I couldn't tell you that what the president uttered just prior to that is the truth," King says.

Congressman Dave Loebsack, a Democrat from Mount Vernon, says Obama met his expectations.

"I was hoping that the president would exercise significant leadership on this issue and I was not disappointed," Loebsack says.

Loebsack says Obama was effective in stressing the need for urgency and outlining proposals that seem to have broad, bipartisan support.

"The recisions issue, for example, not dropping insurance for those who have a catastrophic illness and the preexisting conditions issue so I think there is common ground actually there," Loebsack says. "I was quite pleased, for the most part, from Republicans on the speech."

Congressman Leonard Boswell, a Democrat from Des Moines, says Obama struck the right tone.

"I thought he was very strong and showed determination but yet he wasn't overbearing," Boswell says. "I think that he literally asked both sides of the aisle: 'If you've got a good idea, bring it.'"

Boswell says he hopes Obama is the president who gets health care reform done.

"This is a big deal, but people are so emotionally involved in it and so concerned and worried about it and so it's easy to get them stirred up under fear and so on, but I think we have to do this and I am just very pleased he made a strong statement and he also reached out," Boswell says. "I hope that we move forward. I really, really do."

Democratic Senator Tom Harkin was named chairman of the Senate Health Committee yesterday, taking over the role the late Senator Ted Kennedy held. In a prepared statement issued last night, Harkin praised the president for making a "powerful" speech that illustrated why "failure is not an option." Republican Senator Chuck Grassley issued a prepared statement, too, saying "Americans don't see how giving the government a bigger role in health care makes any sense." Grassley said, instead, that congress should work to help create a "virtual shopping mall with more private health plan choices."